
Religions tibétaines

Tibetan studies in Russia: a brief historical account

Alexander Zorin



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/asr/2498>

DOI: 10.4000/asr.2498

ISSN: 1969-6329

Publisher

École pratique des hautes études. Section des sciences religieuses

Printed version

Date of publication: 15 September 2019

Number of pages: 63-70

ISBN: 978-2909036-47-2

ISSN: 0183-7478

Electronic reference

Alexander Zorin, « Tibetan studies in Russia: a brief historical account », *Annuaire de l'École pratique des hautes études (EPHE), Section des sciences religieuses* [Online], 126 | 2019, Online since 19 September 2019, connection on 26 May 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/asr/2498> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/asr.2498>

Tous droits réservés : EPHE

Religions tibétaines

Alexander ZORIN

Directeur d'études invité
Institut des Manuscrits Orientaux,
Académie des Sciences de la Russie, Saint-Petersbourg

Tibetan studies in Russia: a brief historical account

TIBETOLOGY is one of the oldest branches of Oriental studies in Russia that used to be closely connected with foreign and inner policy of the Russian State starting from the late 17th century. The neighborhood with various Mongolian polities and gradual spread of Russian sovereignty upon some of them caused the necessity of studying and using Tibetan along with Mongolian, Oirat, Buryat languages and also, from the 18th century, studying Tibetan Buddhism as the dominant religion of these people. Huge collections of Tibetan texts and Tibetan arts were gradually gathered in St. Petersburg and some other cities, and the initiator of this process was Peter the Great, the first Russian emperor. However, Tibetology mostly remained in the shadow of Mongolian studies. Official courses of Tibetan were first included in the educational programs in the 20th century only, while there had been a lineage of important scholars of Tibetan (mostly but not exclusively Germans who lived in Russia) who had made a great contribution to European Tibetology. Naturally enough, Tibetan studies in Russia were intertwined with Buddhology, and the St. Petersburg School of Buddhology used Tibetan as a major language, along with Sanskrit, Mongolian and, to a lesser extent, Chinese and Japanese. A great impact was made by a series of expeditions to Central Asia from the 1870s to the middle of the 1920s that had both academic and political goals. After the culmination of the development of Buddhology and Tibetology in the Soviet Russia from the late 1910s to the first half of the 1930s, both disciplines were almost totally cut off with the political oppressions. The gradual revival started after World War 2 in Leningrad/St. Petersburg, Moscow and Ulan Ude, the capital of Buryatia. The process accelerated after the end of the Soviet era when any ideological pressure on religious studies was removed. Elista, the capital of Kalmykia, joined the list of major centers of Russian Tibetology in the 1990s.

The Initial Stage: from the late 17th century to the end of the 18th century

At the end of the 17th century there was a person in Moscow who called himself a translator from Tangut (=Tibetan). It was Pavel Kulvinsky who served at the Ambassadorial (Posolsky) Prikaz, the old Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

He learnt Tibetan during his visits to the Oirats. He died in the 1700s and so his linguistic skills could not be used when the first Tibetan manuscripts were brought to the newly founded Russian capital, St. Petersburg, from two abandoned Dzungar monasteries in South Siberia (presently, Eastern Kazakhstan) in 1718 and 1721. One of the folios was published in *Acta eruditorum* (Leipzig, 1722; Tab. V ad A. 1722 M.1) and became famous because a number of European scholars tried to translate it, starting from the Fourmont brothers whose translation made specially for the Russian Emperor Peter the Great was a pure fantasy. The folio was finally correctly identified and translated by S. Kőrösi Csoma more than a century later, in 1832.

There were but a few Europeans in the 18th century who could use Tibetan as a working language. It cannot be said about such eminent members of the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences who took part in collecting and editing Tibetan texts as Gottlieb Bayer (1694–1738), Gerhard Müller (1705–1783) and Peter Pallas (1741–1811). At the same time, the appearance of a Russia-based network of Buddhist centers in Kalmykia and Transbaikalia with an increasing number of educated lamas opened wide perspectives. Daniel Messerschmidt (1685–1735), who explored Siberia for about 10 years following the order of Peter the Great, learnt the Tibetan alphabet (both *dbu can* and *dbu med*), obviously from some of the lamas, and could read at least some simple texts. He brought a number of Tibetan texts to St. Petersburg in 1727. Pallas's assistant Johannes Jährgig (1747–1795) mastered Tibetan, during his long stays in Kalmykia and Transbaikalia, to such an extent that he could study quite complicated texts, e.g. *The White Beryll* by Desi Sangye Gyatso. Jährgig compiled the first list of Tibetan and Mongolian texts acquired by the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences by the end of the 18th century (1796), and *An Introduction to the Tibetan Script and Language* (in German) which was never published. It is hard to say if it had any influence on the further scholars in St. Petersburg.

The 19th century Classics

In 1818 the Asiatic Museum of the Academy of Sciences was founded as a special institution aimed at systematic collecting and studying manuscripts and old printed books in Eastern languages. Jacob Schmidt (1779–1847) became the curator of the Tibetan, Mongolian and Kalmykian texts that constituted one collection up to the middle of the 19th century. His solid knowledge of relevant languages was obtained when he worked as an agent of a commercial enterprise dealing with the Kalmyks in the steppes between the Volga and the Don. Schmidt composed some fundamental works in the field of Tibetology. Even though his grammar and dictionaries came out a little later than the analogous works of S. Kőrösi Csoma, they turned out to be important for the development of European and Russian Tibetology. Schmidt was the first European to introduce the correct way of arranging Tibetan words in dictionaries, i.e. by the so-called root letters, and not by the first signs in syllabographs. His work with the Tibetan collection was luckily accomplished with a catalogue published soon after his death (Schmidt, Bötlingck 1847) by his co-author, the great Sanskritologist Otto von Bötlingck (1815–1904).

By that time, the AM collection was greatly replenished with texts purchased from Baron Paul Schilling von Canstadt (1786–1837), a great collector of Eastern

books and a talented inventor who attempted successfully at using lithography for reproduction of texts in Oriental languages, including Tibetan. During his stay in Transbaikalia in 1830–1832, Schilling obtained a great collection of books and was particularly proud of the entire set of Kagyur offered to him by the lamas of one of the largest Buryat monasteries, Tsugolsky Datsan. Schilling became one of the earliest European researchers of the structure of the Tibetan canon, and produced, apparently with help of his Buryat assistants, systematic and alphabetic catalogues of several editions of the canon.

Another source of books for the Academy was the Russian Ecclesiastic Mission in Beijing, the acquisition of the Peking edition of Kagyur and Tengyur in the middle of the 19th century being the greatest achievement. Some participants of the Mission became famous scholars. One of them, Vasily Vasiliev (1818–1900), was, without doubt, one of the greatest Tibetologists and Buddhologists of the 19th century. A student of Joseph Kowalewski (1801–1878), he was sent to Beijing with a special task to study Tibetan in-depth so as to be able to head the Tibetan Department that was decided to be established in Kazan University. Unfortunately, this decision was not fulfilled and Vasilyev, who spent nine years in China's capital in diligent studies and returned home in 1850, had to teach Chinese. In 1855, all the main Orientalist Departments with the professors and collections of books were transferred from Kazan to St. Petersburg and Vasilyev spent the second half of his life there. In spite of the academic recognition as the major figure in the field of Russian Sinology he was fundamentally dissatisfied with the inability to accomplish his most cherished projects connected with Tibetan and Buddhist studies.

He planned a series of five monographs under the title *Buddhism, Its Dogmas, History and Literature* but only two volumes were published, namely a general review of the history of Buddhism and its branches (vol. 1), and the translation of the *History of Buddhism in India* by Tāranātha (vol. 3) (Vasilyev 1857–1868). The first volume was quickly translated into German and French, under the patronage of Anton Schiefner (1817–1879) who followed Schmidt as the curator of the Tibetan collection at the Academy and who himself published a number of important books and papers on the Tibetan literature and language. Schiefner was eager to promote Vasilyev's works abroad, seeing him as a man of great knowledge and competence. This cooperation went on smoothly until Schiefner decided to publish the German translation of Tāranātha's *History of Buddhism in India* as *his own* translation without referring to Vasilyev as the original Russian translator on the title page of the book (Schiefner 1869). In a special addition to his German translation he explained the great role of Vasilyev in this matter (Schiefner 1869b). But it did not help, Vasilyev wrote an article where he accused Schiefner in plagiarism. It meant no more professional translations of Vasilyev's papers into German or French to be secured by Schiefner for him.

Vasilyev was obviously instigated by nationalistic sentiments against the Academy of Sciences as a place with German predominance. Schiefner's untimely death was, in a way, a symbolic ending of the period when the St. Petersburg academicians, who rarely used Russian as their working language, appeared to be a closed caste loosely connected with the swiftly increasing educated circles of Russia. In the early 20th century,

we still find many scholars with the German names in St. Petersburg, it suffices to mention here such eminent Buddhologists as S.F. Oldenburg, O.O. Rosenberg, A. von Stael-Holstein, and E.E. Obermiller. Like their predecessors from the 19th century, they used various European languages. Still, there is a distinct difference — they were deeply involved in the life of the Russian society.

The Central Asian Expeditions

The fast development of Tibetan and Buddhist studies in Russia in the late 19th and early 20th century was closely connected with a series of notable expeditions made by the Russian travelers and with political intrigues that involved authorities, diplomats, military figures and scholars in Russia, Great Britain, China, Tibet and Mongolia.

The last third of the 19th century witnessed the decline of the Qing Empire that was used quite bluntly by the outer powers to strengthen their political and economic presence in China. It was accompanied with active exploration of the vast Central Asian territories that remained scarcely studied. A series of Russian military expeditions led by Nikolai Przhevalsky (1839–1888), his followers Mikhail Pevtsov (1843–1902), Vsevolod Roborovsky (1856–1910), Pyotr Kozlov (1863–1935), and some other travellers, had crucial importance for the study of geography, flora and fauna, ethnography, etc., of Central Asia. In 1908–1909, Kozlov had a great luck to excavate the dead city of Khara Khoto and discover its Tangut library that contained some Tibetan texts, too.

Some people close to the Court, first of all the famous medical doctor Pyotr (Zhamsaran) Badmaev (1851, or 1849–1920) and Prince Esper Ukhtomsky (1861–1921), a great collector of Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhist arts, tried to convince the authorities to spread Russian influence over Mongolia and Tibet. Badmayev's agents managed to get into Lhasa under disguise of pilgrims and were welcomed there by Agvan Dorjiev (1853–1938), whose influence on the Thirteenth Dalai Lama resulted in several attempts at finding the Russian protection for Tibet in its relations with Great Britain and China. The culmination of these attempts took place when the Dalai Lama escaped to Urga from the British occupation of Central Tibet. However, the Russian authorities did not dare to intervene in the conflict.

The British aggression was probably triggered with news about contacts between St. Petersburg and Lhasa *via* Dorjiev as well as successful expeditions to the capital of Tibet made by the Buryat Gombozhab Tsybikov (1873–1930) and the Kalmyk Ovshe Norzunov (1874–19??). The earliest photos of Lhasa secretly taken by them were published in St. Petersburg, Paris and the USA. Tsybikov whose mission was purely academic brought to St. Petersburg a great collection of Tibetan block prints that was passed to the AM. His lecture *On Central Tibet* delivered at the meeting of the Russian Geographic Society, in May 1903, made a sensation among academics and brought him the Geographic Society's Przhevalsky Medal "For the brilliant results of the travel to Lhasa". It was highly symbolic because reaching Lhasa was Przhevalsky's dream that he failed to fulfill.

During his expedition Tsybikov mastered Lhasa dialect of the Tibetan language and became the first university professor of Tibetan in Russia. Surprisingly enough, it happened not in St. Petersburg but in the very opposite side of Russia, the city

of Vladivostok where the Eastern Institute was founded in 1899. It was aimed at coining cadres for administrative and commercial institutions in the Russian Far East. The eminent Mongolist Alexei Pozdnev (1851–1929) was appointed its first director and his disciple Tsybikov headed the Department of Mongolian studies from 1906 up to 1917. Tibetan was included in the official schedule, Tsybikov composed *A Spoken Tibetan Manual* (Tsybikov 1908), the first work of this kind in Russia that would remain unchallenged in our country for more than a century.

His countryman Badzar Baradiyn (1878–1937) made an important expedition to Eastern Tibet. In 1905, he was sent from St. Petersburg to Urga with a hope that he would be able to join the Dalai Lama in his return travel to Lhasa with the Russian military escort. Since this plan failed, Baradiyn was only able to accompany him till Amdo where he stopped to carry out his academic explorations. The longest and most important part of his expedition was spent in Labrang where he stayed for eight months in 1906 studying the history, religious ceremonies and everyday life of the monks. He purchased there about two hundred Tibetan block prints specially for the Asiatic Museum. They perfectly complemented Tsybikov's collection, since Baradiyn focused on the writings of the authors more famous in Eastern Tibet.

A little bit earlier, in 1905, an entire set of the Narthang edition of Kagyur and Tengyur was brought from Lhasa to St. Petersburg by the important Kalmykian Lama Dambo-Dashi Ulyanov (1844–1913) who made a pilgrimage to the sacred Buddhist city.

Precious Tibetan documents from Central Asia were acquired for the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences by the Russian consul in Urumqi Nikolai Krotkov (1869–1919), who organized a network of local agents for finding and purchasing old manuscripts, Sergei Oldenburg (1863–1934) who made an expedition to Dunhuang and Xinjiang in 1914–1915, and the Turcologist Sergey Malov (1880–1957) who purchased 53 wooden slips with inscriptions from the Tibetan fort of Miran.

The full list of Russian expeditions to the Tibetan plateau is rather impressive and even Central Tibet with Lhasa were getting more and more accessible for them. Already in the Soviet time, in 1925, a Russian European could enter for the first time the previously forbidden city, this person being the Comintern activist Sergei Borisov (1889–1937), the head of the second secret expedition to Lhasa. However, the dramatic changes in the USSR put an end to these activities. The political and military aspects of the expeditions set aside, it is impossible to overestimate their academic significance. A great stock of knowledge about Tibet in all possible regards was gathered and huge collections of valuable texts, cultural artifacts, etc., replenished Russian museums, mostly in St. Petersburg, providing the academia with a huge variety of sources on the history, culture, literature, ethnography, geography and nature of Tibet.

The rise and destruction of St. Petersburg school of Buddhology

Without doubt, the most inspiring page in the history of Russian Tibetology was connected with the rise of the St. Petersburg school of Buddhology headed by two major figures, Sergei Oldenburg and Theodor Stcherbatsky (1866–1942). They belonged to the lineage started by Kowalewski and continued by Vasilyev who

passed it to his disciple Ivan Minaev (1840–1890), the latter's intellectual heritage being developed by Oldenburg and Stcherbatsky.

Oldenburg was a great organizer of academic activities. From 1904 to 1929 he served as the permanent secretary of the Academy of Sciences. Apart from his own expeditions, he took an active part in the organization of the expeditions of Tsybikov, Baradiyn and some others. From 1916 to 1934, he headed the Asiatic Museum and its further reincarnation — the Institute of Oriental Studies. In 1897, he founded the famous *Bibliotheca Buddhica* series, an important international project that involved a number of leading scholars of Buddhist texts from Russia and abroad.

While Oldenburg as a researcher focused on the historical forms of Buddhism and its cultic and artistic manifestations, another magistral line of the 19th century Russian tradition of Buddhist studies, namely the interpretation of Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy, was successfully carried on by Stcherbatsky. He is most famous for his works on Buddhist logic (Stcherbatsky 1930–1932) based on the study of both Sanskrit and Tibetan texts.

In 1912 Stcherbatsky initiated a great international research project on the study of *Abhidharmakośa* by Vasubandhu but it could be only partially realized because of World War I. However, in the connection with this project a new transregional approach was developed for the study of Buddhist conceptions, terminology and praxis by Stcherbatsky and his eminent disciple Otto Rosenberg (1888–1919). According to T. Ermakova, the theoretical framework of the project was utterly formulated by 1917 and it was exactly then that the St. Petersburg School of Buddhology appeared as a phenomenon of religious studies.

Unfortunately, Rosenberg died from typhosis during the civil war in Russia. However, Stcherbatsky was a prolific teacher, and soon a new generation of talented students was ready to announce themselves. The most important of them were Evgeny Obermiller (1901–1935), who translated several fundamental texts from Sanskrit and Tibetan into English, including *History of Buddhism in India and Tibet* by Bu ston Rin chen sgrub (1290–1364); Andrei Vostrikov (1902–1937), whose *Tibetan Historical Literature* was first edited in 1962 and, being translated into English in 1970, made his name famous; Mikhail Tubyansky (1893–1937) whose pioneering study on the gender aspect of Buddhist tantra was recently edited for the first time and who contributed much to the formation of the academic studies in Mongolia; and Boris Semichov (1900–1981) who studied Tibetan medicine and pharmacology as well as the Abhidharma literature.

The big wave of political terror that covered the Soviet Union in 1937 brought all the Buddhist studies in the country to the violent end. By that time all the Buddhist monasteries were also closed and their libraries and other cultural relics endangered. A special academic expedition sent to Buryatia in 1939–1940 saved some of them and brought the bigger part to Leningrad. Stcherbatsky, like the majority of the full members of the Academy of Sciences, was never oppressed directly although he got his portion of critics for the “out-dated” topics and approaches. We will never know if he could ever raise up again after such a full disaster. He tried to continue his academic work and tried to fulfill his old project for the writing of a Tibetan grammar. The draft was ready by the early 1941 and the preserved galleys of the first part of the proposed book show the process went on quite well. The

German invasion stopped it, too. In 1942 Stcherbatsky died after he was evacuated to Kazakhstan from the besieged Leningrad.

The Second Half of the 20th century

Thanks to the huge academic collections that had to be processed, Tibetan studies never stopped totally in Leningrad. A new impetus to their development was given in the second half of the 1950s when Tibetan was included again in the official schedule at Leningrad State University. Vladimir Vorobyov-Desyatovsky and Boris Pankratov taught it for a while, then Bronislav Kuznetsov was the main teacher of Tibetan at the University up to his death.

The Leningrad Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies remained a major place for the academic studies. Margarita Vorobyova-Desyatovskaya, Lev Savitsky, Alexander Martynov, Elena Ogneva, Raisa Krapivina and Vladimir Uspensky contributed to the studies of Tibetan manuscripts, literature, history and culture.

In the early 1950s the headquarters of the Institute of Oriental Studies were moved to Moscow and it became another center of Tibetan studies in the USSR, especially thanks to George Roerich who returned to Russia in 1957 and made a lot for the revival of Buddhist studies. His abrupt death was a great loss, no program for coining Tibetologists in Moscow was developed. However, Roerich's dictionary of classical Tibetan was edited by his adherents and scholars of Tibetan literature Yuri Parfionovich (1921–1990) and Vilena Dylykova. This dictionary remained crucial for the Russian students up to the beginning of the new Millennium when other sources started to be widely available. The list of main Moscow scholars includes also Vasily Bogoslovsky (1932–1988), an expert in modern Tibetan history, and Anna Tsendina.

Ulan Ude, the capital of Buryatia, closely connected with Mongolian and Buryat Buddhist history and cultural heritage, swiftly developed as a major center of Tibetan studies after the end of the Stalinist period. The Buryat Academic Committee founded in 1922 by Badzar Baradiyn had a series of structural transformations and changes of the name. In the 1950s, up to 1958, it was called the Buryat-Mongolian Research Institute of Culture and for several years, from 1950 to 1955, it was headed by Pyotr Khadalov (1913–1979) who was a member of the Communist Party and, nevertheless, had a deep interest in Buddhology and Tibetology. It was him who invited a few persons who had survived Stalinist oppressions to join the Institute, including Boris Semichov, Lodoy-Zhamso Yampilov (1910–1984) and Bidiya Dandaron (1914–1974). This group of scholars as well as Ksenia Gerasimova (1919–2011) and Regbi Pubaev (1928–1991) contributed much to the development of Tibetan and Buddhist studies in Ulan Ude. A big group of scholars in Buryatia studied extensively Tibetan medical literature. Bidiya Dashiev, the translator of a few fundamental Tibetan treatises into Russian, should be mentioned especially in this connection. In spite of a great number of scholars, Ulan Ude did not have a tradition of teaching Tibetan at the local university until the end of the 1990s, being dependent on Leningrad in this respect. This situation was changed by Dmitry Buraev who introduced Tibetan into the official program of the Buryat State University.

The Buddhist arts and the museum collections attract much attention from the scholars in Buryatia, the most eminent of them being Tsyren-Bazar Badmazhapov who compiled two well-known albums based on the collection of the M. N. Khangalov Museum of the History of Buryatia (Badmazhapov 1995; 2003).

Current situation

The revival of Buddhism and national traditions in the post-Soviet Russia is basically supported by the authorities and society. It certainly helps promoting academic studies, too, especially in the Buddhist republics of the Russian Federation. Thus, Elista, the capital of Kalmykia, joined the major centers of Tibetan studies in the 1990s.

The Kalmyks suffered terribly during the 20th century. Their Buddhist temples were ruined twice, during the civil war in Russia and in the 1930s. In 1943, during the war with Germany, all the Kalmyks were deported by the order of Stalin from their native places to Siberia and Kazakhstan. It had disastrous consequences — a lot of people died, the bulk of cultural relics were lost, and those who survived could not return home until the end of the Stalinist period. In 1956 the Kalmyks were rehabilitated and they started getting back to their native land. The main collection of old texts in Tibetan, Oirat and Mongolian that survived wars and deportation is kept now at the Kalmykian Institute for Humanities, RAS. Its curator Delyash Muzraeva is the leading Kalmykian Tibetologist. The Buddhist studies in Kalmykia are mostly connected with the Oirat legacy but some scholars deal with Tibetan issues, too. Without doubt, more Tibetologists are to appear in this republic in the forthcoming years.

It is very much desired that Tuva, the other Buddhist republic in Russia, would prepare specialists who could catalogue and study the collection of Tibetan texts preserved in the Aldan Maadyr National Museum located in Kyzyl, the Tuvan capital.

Thus, at the moment, the two federal capitals (Moscow and St. Petersburg) and capitals of two Buddhist republics (Ulan Ude and Elista) remain the four major centers of Tibetology. They develop rather independently of each other, although the links between St. Petersburg and Ulan Ude remain closer, this having been manifested in a regular joint conference in memory of Agvan Dorjiev held mainly in Ulan Ude and some other places in Buryatia and, sometimes, in St. Petersburg. But it is rather a Mongolist conference. The annual St. Petersburg seminar on Tibetan studies initiated 6 years ago remains a local event. It may seem that the Russian scholars are more active in establishing closer contacts with foreign Tibetological centers. Buryat scholars are especially active in exploring Chinese areas populated by the Tibetans.

The internationalization of Russian Tibetan studies, after many years of separation and stagnation behind the Iron Curtain results in more papers and books published in English (rarely in other foreign languages). At the same time, Tibetan studies in Russia seem to have a fundamental significance for the inner scholarly and cultural development, given the fact that Tibetan Mongolian Buddhism is one of the officially recognized traditional religions of the Russian Federation and its culture belongs to the common heritage of our country.